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INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Written statement* submitted by the Indian Movement "Tupaj Amaru",
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 January 2000]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

THE RIGHT OF INDIGENOUS MINORITIES TO EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE NORTH OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

1. At the invitation of the Institute for the Problems of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples of the North of the Russian Federation, I visited Yakutsk, capital of the Republic of Sakha, in July 1998 with the aim of finding my brothers and friends living far from the Western world.

2. After a seven-hour non-stop flight from Moscow to Yakutsk, I found myself among Indians like us, who touched me by their hospitality, human warmth and the genuine friendship I had experienced in Soviet times.

3. I was also deeply moved by the enthusiasm and courage with which the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, the Institute for the Problems of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples of the North, and the Indian Movement "Tupaj Amaru" decided to organize the first round table on the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples of the north, which was held in Yakutsk on 16 and 17 July 1998.

4. The following are various reflections and comments on the Yakutsk Declaration adopted by all the participants which I would like to share with members of the Commission on Human Rights, Governments and indigenous peoples, concerning the survival conditions of these peoples whom the international community has forgotten.

5. The spectacle of a great country sliding towards the unknown is sad to behold. This former heartland of Soviet power, extending from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, is a vast territory. The Russian Federation is seven times larger than India, three times larger than the United States and 70 times the size of Japan. It has a population of more than 147 million and possesses immense natural wealth.

6. Siberia, the Asiatic part of the Russian Federation, was conquered by the Russians in 1632. It extends the entire length of northern Asia, from the Urals to the Bering strait. It is reliably reported that this fascinating swathe of territory is home to approximately 400 minority peoples and over 65 indigenous and ethnic groups. The latter have lived and worked there since time immemorial, in harmony with nature and their environment.

7. Yakutia, in north-east Siberia, is three times the size of Bolivia. Its total area is 3,103,200 km^2 yet it has only 686,000 inhabitants. Its mountain ranges, plateaux, tundra and valleys are home to six indigenous peoples and nomadic tribes. But many have either died out or been assimilated into Russian culture.

Economic conditions

8. Centuries after the conquest of Siberia and a decade after the collapse of Soviet power, indigenous populations and minorities of every stripe are having to deal with issues relating to land, territory and the natural resources which make up indigenous identity and constitute the permanent basis of their survival.

9. Notwithstanding this, the Federal Constitution of 1993 replaced collective ownership of land and natural resources by private ownership, whereby the land and its resources may be subject to different forms of ownership and usufruct by individuals, the State and corporations.

10. The value of this ancestral land is enhanced by huge strategic resources that were formerly coveted by the all-powerful State; today these resources are being eyed by transnational corporations from Western countries. The Russian North has abundant energy reserves in the form of oil, natural gas (Tomsk region) and coal (the Kuzbass). It is also rich in minerals, timber, leather and reindeer skins.

11. The vast northern territories which are home to 8 per cent of the population contain 97.5 per cent of the natural gas, 91 per cent of the tin, 15 per cent of the coal, 29.4 per cent of the electricity and as many strategic resources. This is why the capitalist West has "bagged" this huge territory without firing a shot.

12. The indigenous peoples of Yakutia, where transnational corporations have a foothold as everywhere else, are casualties of their own wealth, because they have a superabundance of diamonds, gold, tin, uranium, coal and timber.

13. The indigenous populations are chiefly hunters and fishermen. In the cold northernmost regions, reindeer-breeding forms the material and spiritual basis of the indigenous lifestyle; the people are constantly on the move with their herd, yet they live in harmony with the natural environment.

14. Formerly, despite the harsh climate, the indigenous peoples of the north had formed agricultural cooperatives and learned to grow wheat, barley, potatoes and sugar beet. They had also learned to develop the manufacture of silver and leather craft items. Today their collective farms are in ruins and agricultural production had ceased.

Financial crisis

15. The indigenous peoples of northern Siberia, whose culture and form of social organization have contributed to the progress of Western civilization and who gave everything they had to the Soviet State, have been the first casualties of the economic and financial crisis afflicting the Russian Federation, caused by the transition to a liberal market economy.

16. My brief visit to Yakutsk enabled me to appreciate how far the transition from a socialist to a market economy, from collective emulation to free competition, and the transformation of former party officials into managers and wheeler-dealers have resulted in the social decomposition and disintegration of this vast country.

17. The whole nation is moving into the unknown, relegated to the rank of a developing country, divided as never before into a handful of arrogant and unscrupulous nouveaux riches and the enormous poverty-stricken, excluded and resigned majority.

18. The economic, social and moral crisis that has convulsed this formerly respectable and respected country did not begin on Monday 17 August 1998, when the rouble was devalued by 35 per cent; it goes back to the shock therapy applied and enforced by the architects of neo-liberalism immediately after the collapse of Soviet power.

19. In addition, the pursuit of never-ending reform against the background of the structural adjustment programme imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), regardless of all other considerations, has wrecked the country's production base. The results have been gloomy: paralysis of industrial capacity, plant closures, mass lay-offs, bank failures, rising unemployment, and the gangrene of corruption and organized crime, which have become a threat to the Russian people and collective security.

20. During my visit to Yakutsk, I was able to observe that the collective and State farms which used to feed millions have now fallen into disrepair. Travelling along the legendary River Lena, I saw rusting hulks, ravaged by time, apparently confined to port forever.

21. Western analysts report that Russian GDP has fallen by 50 per cent (some experts say 83 per cent) during the past six years. This means that the country has returned to its pre-industrial level under tsarism. Some Western media sources, citing people who have been directly affected, report that reindeer-breeding – the basis of the nomadic lifestyle – has undergone a 35 per-cent decline since 1990, meat production has fallen by two thirds, and five times less milk is being produced (Le Monde, 8 September 1998).

22. In a country where the invisible hand of transnational corporations is attempting to transform this vast territory into a free-trade zone, the region's indigenous peoples have been abandoned to the anarchy of market forces, forgotten by the State and condemned to genocide on the altar of neo-liberalism.

23. The economic and financial crisis in the Russian Federation provides yet another example of the failure of neo-liberal economic strategies imposed by Westerners on other peoples. The liberal dogma implemented in the Russian Federation by IMF and the World Bank has led to ruin.

24. Discredited and exposed throughout the world for their disastrous mismanagement of the financial crisis and the bankruptcy of their interventionist policy in the Russian Federation, IMF and the World Bank are heavily implicated in the disaster which now faces the country. There is an urgent need to change the ground rules of these international institutions in order to find an alternative to the neo-liberal model of development.

Poverty

25. During my visit to Yakutia, I learned many things from my friends and listened to their nostalgia-tinged condemnation of the deceit and cowardice which led to the collapse of the Soviet system, especially the destruction of social welfare which swept away all the achievements of the Soviet people. More than 15 million Russians are experiencing famine

during the transition to unbridled, arrogant and free-for-all capitalism. Three quarters of the population (with an official annual per capita GDP of $3,200) live below the poverty line (Le Monde, 8 September 1998).

26. Average income, which had already declined 40 per cent in the period 1992-1997, is now in free fall. In 1996, 34 million Russians were living in poverty; today this scourge affects the most vulnerable sections of the population – children, women and the elderly.

27. Pensioners and older people who contributed to the glory of the Soviet Union and won victories in two world wars have been humiliated; many are now forced to rummage through dustbins. Reduced to begging in order to survive, they bemoan their poverty before curious tourists on Revolution Square and at the entrance to every metro station.

28. The structural adjustment programme implemented by IMF has had a brutal effect on health care, education, food supplies and the standard of living in general. Life expectancy has fallen from 69 to 58, the birth rate has dropped from 14.7 to 9.5 per cent, and the infant mortality rate is climbing.

29. Meanwhile, school enrolment is down 8 per cent and malnutrition due to calorie-starvation is affecting children's physical and mental health. Epidemics, tuberculosis and other diseases which had formerly been eradicated are back with a vengeance. Poor, indigenous and excluded people are also prey to alcoholism, prostitution, suicide and stress in this society which is sick with corruption.

30. For six months, and in some cases three years, teachers, miners, local officials and soldiers guarding nuclear weapons have not been paid. Those who have received something have been paid according to the barter system, which accounts for at least 50 per cent of all transactions. In the metallurgical, building and commercial sectors, barter is a built-in component of an anachronistic production strategy.

31. The wholeness of the cultural, social and linguistic fabric of indigenous civilizations, and especially their identity, is gravely endangered by blind market forces. More than 10 ethnic minorities are currently on the verge of extinction. They have already lost their language and writing systems, i.e. the memory of their ancestors.

32. It is essential that the human rights bodies of the United Nations and the international community pay special attention to protecting the identity of the indigenous peoples of the north and promoting their right to land and natural resources, which are prerequisites for the survival of these ancestral civilizations.